



FOOD SYSTEMS DISCUSSION PAPER

Introduction

The UN Food Systems Summit will be held in the final quarter of 2021 at the UN General Assembly. It comes in response to increasing levels of hunger and multiplying global crises in an increasingly complex and interconnected globalised world. Securing equitable, resilient and sustainable food systems is a high priority for the whole world as the 21st century progresses.

This summit comes at a time of unprecedented global connections and rapid change. The global food system is deeply interconnected, in such a way that events and crises in one part of the world can have an impact in another, very distant or seemingly separate place. Climate change is the defining threat and threat multiplier of our century. It is happening against a backdrop of increased disaster occurrence everywhere in the world¹. But as the crisis brought on by Covid-19 has demonstrated, while all people on the earth are dependent on food systems, we are not all equally vulnerable to the shocks and stressors that affect them. Poverty, gender, age, rurality, disability, ethnicity and a host of other factors lead to extremes of vulnerability.

WHAT ARE FOOD SYSTEMS?

The term “food systems” refers to the complex network of actors and interactions along food value chains from production through to transport and processing right through to consumption and disposal: sometimes referred to as farm to fork (and beyond). A concept note produced for the upcoming summit describes food systems as ‘interlinked value-adding activities involved in the production, aggregation, processing, distribution, consumption and disposal of food products that originate from agriculture, forestry or fisheries, and food industries, and the broader economic, societal and natural environments in which they are embedded’². This means that food systems in turn are connected to other systems, including market systems, health systems, education systems and so on.

GOAL works in fourteen countries with people in communities experiencing crises and extreme poverty. Food, nutrition and hunger are at the heart of much of our work in rural and urban communities and places affected by crises and emergencies. This paper builds on GOAL’s expertise in food and nutritional security, supporting resilient market systems, and addressing inequality, to make core recommendations to governments and international organisations for the UNFSS. While GOAL works in many contexts, this paper focuses on the rural poor, the population at the centre of world food systems and often at the margins of power.

¹ FAO. 2021. The impact of disasters and crises on agriculture and food security: 2021. Rome.

² UNFSS 2021 Scientific Group. Food Systems – Definition, Concept and Application for the UN Food Systems Summit <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/leadership#scientific-group>

About the UN Food Systems Summit:

The UN Food Systems Summit builds on a growing infrastructure of global commitments to address hunger, poverty and ecological disaster, including the Sustainable Development Goals; the Paris Agreement on climate change and many other sector-specific agreements and targets. The summit is an opportunity to harness the existing extensive normative framework on nutrition, food, agriculture, resilience and sustainability, and to realise and put into action existing commitments.

The summit occurs in the context of prior work done by existing multilateral efforts and institutions. Since 2000, the UN has included a Special Rapporteur mandate on the right to food, and since 2008 the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS) has put in place the structures for discussing food security internationally. The CFS has established effective mechanisms for the participation of civil society, the private sector and governments. This has made the CFS the key global facilitator of changes in food systems³.

Laid out against five action tracks, the food systems summit aims to mobilise action in the following key areas:

1

Ensure Access to safe and nutritious food: Work to end hunger and all forms of malnutrition and reduce the incidence of non-communicable disease, enabling all people to be nourished and healthy. This goal requires that all people at all times have access to sufficient quantities of affordable and safe food products. Achieving the goal means increasing the availability of nutritious food, making food more affordable and reducing inequities in access to food.

2

Shift to sustainable consumption patterns: Work to build consumer demand for sustainably produced food, strengthen local value chains, improve nutrition, and promote the reuse and recycling of food resources, especially among the most vulnerable. This Action Track recognizes that we need to eliminate wasteful patterns of food consumption; it also recognizes that we need to facilitate a transition in diets towards more nutritious foods that require fewer resources to produce and transport.

3

Boost nature positive production: Work to optimize environmental resource use in food production, processing and distribution, thereby reducing biodiversity loss, pollution, water use, soil degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. In its pursuit of this goal, the Action Track will aim to deepen understanding of the constraints and opportunities facing smallholder farmers and small-scale enterprises along the food value chain. It will also strive to support food system governance that realigns incentives to reduce food losses and other negative environmental impacts.

4

Advance equitable livelihoods: Contribute to the elimination of poverty by promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all actors along the food value chain, reducing risks for the world's poorest, enabling entrepreneurship and addressing the inequitable access to resources and distribution of value. Action Track 4 will improve resilience through social protection and seek to ensure that food systems "leave no one behind."

5

Build resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress: Ensure the continued functionality of sustainable food systems in areas that are prone to conflict or natural disasters. The Action Track will also promote global action to protect food supplies from the impacts of pandemics. The ambition behind Action Track 5 is to ensure that all people within a food system are empowered to prepare for, withstand, and recover from instability. Action Track 5 also aims to help people everywhere participate in food systems that, despite shocks and stressors, deliver food security, nutrition and equitable livelihoods for all.⁴

³ Canfield, M., Anderson, M., and McMichael, P. 2021 'UN Food Systems Summit 2021: Dismantling Democracy and resetting corporate control of food systems' *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems* 13 April 2021 <https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2021.661552>

Fakhiri M., Elver H. and de Schutter O. 2020 'The UN Food Systems Summit: How not to respond to the urgency of reform' <http://www.ipsnews.net/2021/03/un-food-systems-summit-not-respond-urgency-reform/>

⁴ <https://www.un.org/en/food-systems-summit/action-tracks>

Improving access to nutritious food

Every year since 2014, the number of people without enough food to meet their basic needs in the world has increased⁵. **Poor diets are now the main contributor to the global burden of disease**⁶. No country in the world, regardless of its development levels, is free from all types of malnutrition, but nutritional deficiencies including wasting, stunting and diet-related non-communicable diseases especially affect poor rural populations in low and middle income countries⁷.

Ensuring access to and consumption of nutritious food is complex, involving four dimensions: availability of diverse and nutritious food; economic and social access to such food; utilisation of this food; and stability of all of these dimensions over time⁸. Shocks and stressors, including drought, flooding, insects, market disruptions and economic crises (among many other things), can all undermine access to and consumption of nutritious food. To secure positive nutritional outcomes, many other systems also come into play, including water and sanitation, protection, health and education. GOAL works to address malnutrition where it occurs, and to support people, communities and systems to pursue improved nutritional outcomes.

Social inequalities, embedded in roles, responsibilities and economic opportunities, mean that even in a single community, nutrition levels can vary radically. Achieving nutritional security means paying attention to women, in their roles producing and preparing food for consumption, their connection to infant wellbeing through the first thousand days of life from conception to end of life, and in their exclusion from critical spaces including property and resource ownership and control⁹. It also means attending to the specific nutritional needs and access requirements of older women and men¹⁰, and women and men with disabilities¹¹. Poor nutrition is one of the health issues that most affects indigenous peoples around the world, linked to poverty, environmental degradation and contamination of ecosystems, loss of land and a reduction of traditional food sources.¹²

Building resilience into food systems is essential in order to secure positive nutritional outcomes for people throughout the world. Actions that can increase resilience include working towards gender equality; the utilisation of conservation agricultural techniques; removal of barriers to local and national food sovereignty approaches; and policies that ensure that food production, food consumption and nutrition are explicitly linked. The crisis triggered by Covid-19 has demonstrated that systems are most resilient where they can adapt to integrate the ability of communities to care for their own well-being, as the Malawi case study illustrates.

⁵ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2020. *The State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2020. Transforming food systems for affordable healthy diets*. Rome, FAO.

⁶ The Lancet. "Globally, one in five deaths are associated with poor diet." *ScienceDaily*. ScienceDaily, 3 April 2019.

⁷ Global Panel, 2015. *Biofortification: An agricultural investment for nutrition*. Policy Brief No. 1. London, UK: Global Panel on Agricultural and Food Systems for Nutrition.

⁸ FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO 2020 op. cit.

⁹ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/rural-women>

¹⁰ HelpAge. 2013. *Nutrition Interventions for Older People in Emergencies*.

¹¹ IASC. 2019. *Guidelines on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities in Humanitarian Action*.

¹² UN DESA. 2009. *State of the World's Indigenous Peoples, Volume I*.

ADAPTIVE PROGRAMMING TO FIGHT MALNUTRITION ALONGSIDE COVID-19 IN MALAWI

The most basic requirement of the world's food system is that nobody on the planet should become sick or die from hunger. In Malawi, 39% of all children under the age of 5 experience stunting, and 23% of all child deaths are related to under-nutrition. Nutritional interventions save the lives of young children.

MUAC (Middle-Upper Arm Circumference) is a well-established tool for quickly and accurately identifying acute malnutrition in children, ordinarily administered by trained health care workers. This information triggers the admission of children to effective therapeutic programmes. The Family MUAC approach¹³ trains caregivers, typically mothers, in the use of the simple MUAC tape so that they can detect malnutrition themselves and seek follow-up care. In Malawi admissions to a supplementary feeding programme increased by 69% following the training. Thanks to this intervention, caregivers have the knowledge to access support as soon as they need it, without waiting for healthcare workers to conduct episodic screenings. The Family MUAC approach was piloted by GOAL in South Sudan, Ethiopia and Malawi in 2018. When the Covid-19 crisis struck in early 2020, GOAL already knew that Family MUAC was a safe and empowering method and could be sustained even allowing for social distancing. Thanks to advocacy by GOAL, the approach has been taken on at national level by the UN-led Nutrition Cluster and the Malawi Ministry of Health.

Securing decent livelihoods for the rural poor

Rural communities play an essential role in the global food system: **without thriving rural communities, there is no prospect of a sustainable food system.** A significant challenge to feeding a growing world is to find approaches to food value chains that provide economic opportunities for the poorest people, often themselves primary producers and also purchasers of food, vulnerable to price and supply volatility.

Employment opportunities for the rural poor are frequently inadequate, driving poverty and hunger, rural degradation, and rapid urbanisation. Much agricultural work is temporary or related to seasonal surges, leading to constant disruption and shocks for precarious families¹⁴. **The development of effective food value chains can fight poverty and support human rights**, so long as producers and workers are properly rewarded for their work and appropriate market opportunities are promoted, with an emphasis on local, sub national and national levels.¹⁵ The impact of COVID on SMEs has been devastating across the world. **A vital test of the global food system will be the extent to which it creates economic opportunities for micro-enterprises** which are environmentally, socially and economically sustainable and support the food system. Local governments, public services and private companies all have essential roles to play in the creation and maintenance of resilient equitable and sustainable food systems.

As with nutrition, **inequality has a strong impact on who benefits from livelihoods opportunities.** Women are often excluded from ownership and control of land and resources, and are impeded from economic activity by their extensive unpaid and undervalued responsibilities including caring work and community work. Poorly designed efforts to integrate women economically can add to their significant workloads, so women and girls should be integrated in the design and delivery of interventions, and active consideration made of time poverty. Young people enter the job market at a disadvantage owing to lack of assets and experience; this is worsened for those lacking literacy and/ or educational qualifications. Globally, the agricultural sector is responsible for 70% of child labour situations, while 26% of all forced labourers in the world work in the food supply chain.¹⁶ Migrant workers and refugees, when their legal status, housing and employment rights are precarious, find it especially hard to establish sustainable livelihoods.

¹³ GOAL: The Family MUAC Approach <https://resources.acutemalnutrition.org/SoAM-PDF-GOAL.pdf>

¹⁴ UNFSS Action track discussion starter: Action track 4

¹⁵ Irish Forum for International Agricultural Development (IFIAD): Written submission to Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in response to the public consultation paper on the White Paper on International Development.

¹⁶ GAA 2020 Advancing human rights policy and practice in the agribusiness sector: an implementation toolkit Global Agribusiness Alliance

MARKET SYSTEMS APPROACHES IN UGANDA

Uganda has one of the world's youngest populations: 76% of the population is below the age of 30. This generation holds the key to future resilience, but it faces enormous challenges. GOAL's innovative Young Africa Works programme uses a market systems approach to target 300,000 young women and men (aged 15-30), including refugees and people with disabilities, to access dignified, fulfilling and sustainable work in the agricultural sector. Many poor rural youths enter the job market with an inadequate education, and the share of youth who are neither in work nor education is three times higher for young women (18.6%) than for young men (6.6%).¹⁷ Nutritional needs among young people - many of whom are parents - are high, and most of the rural poor spend most of their household incomes on food, in a context of rising food prices owing to the Covid-related economic crisis. There is an urgent need for farmers to diversify the crops they grow, the markets they sell to, and for workers to find greater diversity of livelihood options.

The Young Africa Works programme focuses on this cohort of young rural people. Working with private sector actors is crucial to this approach. Among other things, the programme:

- Targets employment along the food value chain for young people, 70% of them women, 10% refugees, and 5% people with disabilities.
- Promotes inclusive business models, supporting local enterprises to hire from the target community.
- Works with local agri-businesses to develop proactive procurement procedures targeting inclusion of smaller scale producers in the value chain.
- Promotes conservation agricultural techniques including drought-resistant crops and intercropping.
- Participates in advocacy for the extension of quality digital access to rural areas of Uganda.
- Provides market intelligence and data to small farmers to enable them to adapt quickly to market conditions.
- Increases access to formal and informal financial services, products and capital.
- Increases financial literacy knowledge and capacity to effectively use the financial services available.
- Organises rural young women and men to identify priority issues and promote these with policy-makers and business leaders.

Building climate resilience into food systems

The interconnection between food systems and climate crisis presents perhaps the most urgent challenge to world leaders. The 2019 UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and Land report notes that unless sweeping action is taken on climate change, food and nutrition insecurity for the world's poorest will accelerate to a disastrous level.¹⁸ Increased food production must not exceed the ecological limits identified by the UNFCCC.

The Food Systems Summit seeks to boost nature-positive production, that is, to identify ways of increasing the productivity of agriculture, fisheries and forestry that also benefit the natural environment. **Adaptation to climate change must accelerate, and be carried out in locally sensitive ways**, since the impacts of changes vary across crops, regions and contexts¹⁹. Industrial scale agriculture, aquaculture and natural resource extraction increases the threat of climate disaster, particularly in the remaining ecologically rich parts of the world.

While advances in human knowledge will have an important impact on food systems, **these must be grounded in the rights and expertise of the people who tend to the ecosystem**, and who are often excluded from the production and recognition of knowledge. Responsible food production and agricultural, fishery and forestry development respects cultural heritage and traditional knowledge²⁰. Accelerating crises are leading to the potential for natural resource competition, including competition and conflict over water, land and soil. This must be offset through efficient usage and guarantees of the rights of the most vulnerable against resource loss.

A SUSTAINABLE BLUE ECONOMY IN CENTRAL AMERICA

GOAL's work on the Blue Economy on the Caribbean and Pacific coasts of Central America demonstrates that true sustainability requires a systems approach. The region in question is home to an indigenous and Afro-descendent population of fishing communities who are dependent on marine coastal resources.

Industrial fishing dominates the geographic area and threatens the fishstock and the livelihoods of local communities. In collaboration with local stakeholders, GOAL analysed the small-scale fisheries market system in its entirety and developed a model for supporting these communities in harmony with their greatest asset: the coastal ecosystem.

Coastal communities in Honduras are highly vulnerable to extreme weather events including hurricanes, tidal surges and drought. The mangrove corridors which provide much of their food and livelihood serve as a natural protection for small fishing communities, but these are suffering from extreme degradation due to over-exploitation. It is challenging for smallholders - producers and processors - to integrate their production in the large-scale lobster and shrimp industries which dominate the coast.

Centred on building environmental, social and economic resilience, GOAL's Blue Economy programme in Central America leverages the potential of critical markets systems to create incentives for social inclusion and environmental conservation. Among other things, the programme promotes:

- Responsible fishing practices by all users of coastal resources, large and small.
- Responsible and sustainable coastal resource management, in line with the FAO voluntary guidelines for the reduction of unreported, unregulated and illegal fishing.
- Multi-stakeholder discussion and decision spaces involving fishing associations, local and national government and intermediate service providers, both public and private.
- Legislation and regulations to protect small-scale fishers, and support traceability to ensure fairness and transparency for fishing cooperatives.
- Stable and equitable commercial relationships, for example between fishers, intermediaries and buyers.

¹⁸ IPCC, SPECIAL REPORT: SPECIAL REPORT ON CLIMATE CHANGE AND LAND Summary for Policymakers, 2019 - <https://www.ipcc.ch/srcccl/chapter/summary-for-policymakers/>

¹⁹ Welthungerhilfe and Concern Worldwide 2019 Global Hunger Index The challenge of hunger and climate change. Dublin/ Bonn

²⁰ FAO Principles for Responsible Investment in Agriculture: Principle 7

Conclusion and Recommendations

GOAL welcomes the UN Food Systems Summit as an opportunity to recognise the world's complex interconnected food systems and to agree actions that strengthen important dimensions of these systems. Meaningful progress will occur by ensuring that the summit itself is democratic and inclusive. GOAL makes the following recommendations to participants and stakeholders of this important summit:

Programmatic recommendations to donors, governments and international organisations:

- **Increase access, availability and use of improved agricultural inputs**, in particular **climate-smart and nutritionally-improved seeds**, facilitating their use by the private sector where possible. In emergency contexts food baskets, where used, should include nutritionally-improved content, which will in turn drive demand for these inputs.
- **Enable MSMEs as crucial components of sustainable pro-poor rural food systems.** Governments should ensure effective policy and regulation to enable infrastructural, financial and digital inclusion to the last mile.
- **Use programmes and incentives to ensure women's participation at all points in food value chains**, mindful of women's existing, often invisible workloads. Recognise and plan for the specific barriers to economic inclusion that women experience; ensure the inclusion of women and girls in design and implementation of initiatives; and seek gender equality in all policy and programme design.
- **Use programmes and incentives to address other specific and identified axes of exclusion** including age, disability, race and ethnicity, caste and others as relevant.
- **Include social protection measures in rural development.** Unconditional Cash transfers or guaranteed labour schemes for the poorest in rural areas provide a basic income, enabling the poor to invest time in their own farms rather than working as labourers on other farms.
- **Invest in Blue Food production and insects** as sustainable sources of protein for human consumption which is of increasing importance to global food security.



